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State funding for student financial aid fell more in Alabama last year than in any other Southern state

Fall traced to end of desegregation case

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State funding for student financial aid fell more in Alabama last year than in any other Southern state, a direct result of the end of a desegregation case that had pumped millions of dollars into scholarships for decades.

As many as 9,000 Alabama college students have lost at least some financial aid as a result, state officials

The Southern Regional Education Board, in a survey released Tuesday, found that Alabama cut aid to students 8.5 percent in the 2007-08 academic year, compared with the previous year. The decline brought the amount of state money dedicated to financial aid for students to \$35.5 million.

Among the 16 Southern states included in the survey, state contributions to financial aid increased an average of 9.4 percent. Only Mississippi, Georgia and Maryland also posted declines.

Joe Marks, director of education data services for the Atlanta-based nonprofit behind the survey, said Alabama's decline is a direct result of a loss of \$10 million in financial aid that had been mandated by the settlement of a 1981 segregation lawsuit.

That suit, commonly called Knight vs. Alabama, claimed that the state's officially desegregated colleges still had vestiges of segregation. Among them, plaintiffs alleged, were a lack of high-demand academic programs and facilities and few white students at Alabama State University and Alabama A&M, and not enough black students, faculty and administrators at the state's predominantly white schools.

The court ordered more than \$200 million in state spending over more than 25 years to address the problems, and much of the money funded scholarships statewide.

Gregory Fitch, executive director of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education, said the loss of \$10 million in funding last year means many students have had to find other sources of income, and some likely have had to drop out of school.

Efforts to reach officials at ASU and A&M, where many students benefited from financial aid under the settlement, were unsuccessful Tuesday.

Other findings from the survey:

Alabama spends an average of \$8,277 in state money per student, an increase of 14.2 percent over the previous year. That ranked the state fifth among the 16 states surveyed, which averaged \$7,888 per student.

Alabama ranked first among Southern states for the percentage of students who stay in school after their first year at a two-year college, with 74 percent staying or transferring.

The number of degrees awarded by two-year colleges in the state fell 8.6 percent in 2008, to 9,896. Only four of 16 states ranked saw the number of degrees awarded decline.

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